DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 239 534 HE 016 943

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TITLE Parsons College: Innovative Ideas, or Unethical Practices.
PUB DATE 12 Dec 83
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Accountability; *Accreditation (Institutions); Accrediting Agencies; Educational History; Educational Responsibility; Ethics; Higher Education; Innovation; *Institutional Evaluation; *Open Enrollment; *Private Colleges; *School Closing; Small Schools
IDENTIFIERS *Parsons College IA

ABSTRACT

Conditions leading to the loss of accreditation by Parsons College and ethical questions raised by the closing of the college are considered. Practices at the college that were undertaken under the Parsons Plan during 1955-1967 increased enrollment from 200 to over 5,000 students in 11 years. These practices included: open-door admission for students who either could not be accepted by or were dismissed from other colleges, a set of core courses, a preceptor system, a system that allowed students to charge their meals and other expenses, the use of modern computers, offering attractive employment benefits to faculty members, and using a prominent public relations firm and law/accounting agencies. Problems between the college and the accrediting agency occurred from 1963 until 1967, when Parsons College lost its accreditation. The practices that were criticized at this small, private liberal arts college are today common procedures at American campuses. (SW)

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Parsons College: Innovative Ideas, or Unethical Practices

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December 12, 1983

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Introduction

Parsons College was not the first college to lose it's accreditation and close, and will not be the last. However, few would doubt that it was certainly a college of many firsts. Until 1955, Parson's College was like any number of other small colleges in the midwest. Even with an enrollment of only 200 students, a dreary campus, ludicrously low salaries, a physical plant in disrepair, and deficit financing as the customary method of business, Parsons was not on it's last leg, as many would have others to believe (Koerner, 1970).

The situation did, however, call for new approaches to these old problems, and in 1954 when the then president of Parsons resigned, the trustees began to look for a new president that could bring new ideas to the college. After a year of searching and the hiring of an interim president, the Parsons trustees made their decision, and appointed a New York clergyman by the name of Dr. Millard Roberts as their new president.

By 1967, under the direction of Dr. Roberts and the Parsons Plan, Parsons had increased enrollment to over 5000 students, was paying it's faculty between $20,000 and $40,000 for an eight month year, had increased it's physical plant value from $1,000,000.00 to $21,000,000.00 and had five satellite campuses mirroring it (Collins, 1968).

In 1967, the North Central Association of College and Secondary Schools removed Parsons' accreditation. This marked the beginning of the end for Parsons College. But how could this happen to an institution that was experiencing such success? Were the practices being used at Parsons so unethical as to cause the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools to remove their accreditation? Or was Parsons College a victim of the ambiquity of higher education?

Could it be as Koerner said, "The story of Parsons is an image, only slightly magnified of what has overtaken American Higher Education during the last quarter century, and has brought it to a state of moral, financial, and administrative bankruptcy (Koerner, 1970)."

Various reasons were given for withdrawing Parsons College's accredidation; yet, today, many of the conditions cited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools exist as common practice on almost all American campuses. Following a brief description of Parsons College under the leadership of Dr. Millard Roberts, this paper will examine some of the practices cited, the conditions leading to the loss of accreditation, as well as some of the ethical questions raised by the closing of Parson College.

The Parsons Plan

Under President Roberts, Parsons had become a booming college. He recruited students who either couldn't be accepted, or were dismissed from other colleges. Enrollment soared from 200 to over 5,000 students in eleven years. All of this was accomplished by what was quickly dubbed the "Parsons Plan", which included an open door admissions policy, modern accomodations and conveniences, and nationally-famous firms representing Parsons in their public relations, accounting and legal matters (Collins, 1968, p. 429).

The Parsons Plan was built upon an open-door admissions policy, and a set of basic "core courses" which resembled the General Education courses at other colleges. However, unlike other institutions, special attention was given to these courses in the form of a preceptor system. This system involved the use of: (1) outstanding professors, who would give lectures to large classes in huge lecture halls wired with sound equipment; (2) an instructor, typically a high school teacher with a masters degree, who would then conduct a discussion concerning the lecture; and (3) a preceptor, typically a recent Parsons graduate, or the wife of a student, who was assigned to a particular class and would tutor the student on an individual basis (Collins, 1968; Koerner, 1970).

The Plan also involved many modern features, including gimcrack accomodations, in buildings that were built strictly with function and cost in mind. In addition, an innovative student identification card also served as charge plates, and students would be given charge privileges at the bookstore, the dining halls, bowling alley, coffee shop and so on, which not only increased college revenue, but provided major funding of many of the college's projects. (Collins, 1968, p. 429).

Modern computers, were put to use to score tests and keep records. Secretarial work was centralized, though according to one author this meant that professors did their own typing on typwriters they brought from home (Collins, 1968, p. 430).

Finally, the Plan included a nationally-famous accounting firm, a Madison Avenue public relations firm, a Chicago law firm and a private plane and pilot. All of these components would later play an important role in contributing to the problems of the college, as many administrators and educators of other institutions criticized Roberts and Parsons for such "flashy" services. As we will see later, the NCA objected strenuously to, what has become, such traditional practices.

Parsons did not hide the fact that it was a "second chance" college. As the Life Magazine article which appeared in June 3, 1966 demonstrated, one of Parson's greatest strengths was that it knew it's mission and remained true to it, even when that mission was threatening it's very existance.

Students were from middle to upper class families, and paid $1160.00 a tri-mester to attend Parsons, though scholarships did pay for part of the tuition ("The Flunking of", 1967). Those students who were not making progress toward graduation were required to attend the summer tri-mester, or face the possibility of not being readmitted the following Fall.

Faculty members at Parsons taught only eight months out of the year, and were given one of the trimesters off, with pay. Their salaries ran from $20,000 to $40,000 an eight month period, included paid membership in the local country club, grants of money to purchase local housing and paid tuition to send members of their family to the college of their choice ("The Flunking of", 1967; Koerner, 1970).

This then was the Parsons Plan. A Plan that had made Parsons into a booming college, one which had gone from an enrollment of 200 to 5000 in eleven years, attracted some of the finest faculty in the profession, paying them top salaries and benefits, a college that served the "second chance" student, used computers for record keeping, became very well known and still made a profit.

Dr. Millard Roberts

In 1955 Dr Millard Roberts was hired by the trustees of Parson college. Roberts was a graduate of Syracuse, attended Yale and the University of Chicago. Before coming to Parsons College, he had developed a reputation as a successful fund raiser for the fashionable Brick Presbyterian Church in New York (Froak, 1966). Dean G. McKee, a Parsons alumnus who was also a well-known minister and head of the Biblical Seminary in New York City, wrote to the trustees search committee
and made the following comments concerning Roberts, Dr. Roberts's strong points are: 1) He comes near being a born promoter. He has ideas, and with them clear insight, as to ways and means for their realization. He understands publicity.... He has an excellent capacity for makinig contacts with people ....2) He should have a grasp of what education is all about....3) As an ordained mininster and a leader... in the church, he should be able to contribute much that is essential in making a church-related college what it ought to be.... He would quickly become a leader in church and academic circles in the Midwest.... Not everyone will agree with him as his aggressiveness sometimes reaches

too far too fast but, with a competent board of trustees to work with him, my judgement is that very substantial progress would be made if he were called to Parsons."(Koerner, 1970, p. 8,9)

Roberts immediately realized the task at hand and began to slash the number of courses offered from 700 to 168, and to introduce a trimester system that would keep the campus humming and money coming in all year around (Parsons Progress, 1962, p. 61). He involved himself in every aspect of the internal administration of the college and eventually sold the trustees on adopting a modified Ruml Plan to acheive the higher salaries he felt necessary for the faculty. Using the modified Ruml plan he felt he could also acheive higher student faculty ratio, and reduce the classes even further (MaGarrell, 1967, p.4).

The Ruml Plan suggested college faculty had been allowed to usurp power over the curriculum, after which they demonstrated, as a body, their incompetence to use that power. He further suggested the time had come for college trustees to be bold and reclaim their lost authority. Once they had reclaimed authority they were advised to restructure the curriculum, working through the administration, according to the academic facts of life (Koerner, 1970, p. 78).

Roberts was well known on the lecture circuit and it is said that in one year he had logged 210,000 miles in the Parsons owned plane and spoke before over 200 teacher and management groups at a fee of from $300.00 to $500, at a time when he was receiving a salary of $42,000 a year (Froak, 1966). On these trips Roberts would talk about dollars and cents and how his college was making a profit. Koerner mentions that in one of his talks with Dr. Roberts he stated the following:.."the 1963 NCA team had been composed of " three Iowa College presidents who were embarassed by a college in their state without a deficit." (Koerner, 1970, p. 173)

The fact was that the members of the 1963 NCA team were all from out of state and there was only one member who was in fact a college president. Roberts was well known for his "exaggeration" of the truth.

Roberts appeared on the Huntly Brinkly Report and Today on NBC several times dicussiong the uniqueness of Parsons College, and later, at great expense, David Brinkly appeared at Parsons (Gibson, 1968, p. 590). These types of appearances alienated the educational establishment to the extent that it created problems for Parsons and Roberts.

Kennith W. Perry, once a senior Parsons professor commented, "Roberts created a lot of his own problems, but his real sin in the NCA was rocking the boat. They don't want you to be creative. If you're creative, they'll kill

you like they did Parsons."(Koerner, 1970)

Others suggested great pressure was being brought to bare by all the small colleges in Iowa that felt threatened by Parsons and the methods and practices being used by Roberts (Koerner, 1970; "Fleecing a Black, 1970). After all, Roberts, in hundreds of speeches and newspaper reports, on radio and television, had made his contemporaries among college presidents look like fools (Gibson, 1968, p. 590).

As the late sixties arrive Parsons has a Plan that is working, a president by the name of Millard Roberts who has demonstrated his outstanding and creative fund raising ability; who has brought Parsons College national recognition, an enrollment of 5000 students, a faculty that is composed of some of the best professors in the nation, six satelite campuses which are patterned after the Parsons Plan and an alienated educational establishment. It would seem that Parsons had a bright future. What could go wrong?

Problems with NCA

In 1967, Parsons College lost it's NCA accreditation. That fall it's enrollment dropped 60%. This was the beginning of what would eventually lead to the closing of Parsons College.

The history of Parsons College from 1963 until 1967 is one of almost constant problems with NCA. After a 1963 visit by the NCA, Parsons College found itself on probationary status, which was then lifted, based on promises of change made during the 1965 visit. Normally NCA visits are made once every ten years, unless weaknesses are found during a visit, at which time an interim evaluation is conducted after a specified time. The 1963 report was never released, but it is beleived in general that the college administration was "roasted" throughly in the report. Some beleive that Roberts made unofficial promises to NCA on which he later reneged. Roberts suggested "the whole thing was a plot by other schools which had become jealous of his success." (Collins, 1968, p. 433; Froak, 1966, p. 78; Collins, 1968)

It was not until a 1966 Life magazine article, which portrayed Parsons as a school for "Flunkies", that NCA resummed it's "special handling" of Parsons. Koerner states that there probably had never been another accreditation visit to a college on the basis of an article in a popular magaziine, nor should there have been (Koerner, 1970, p. 217). John Drekholf, a NCA consultant assigned to Parsons in 1967, wrote a letter to NCA after finding that they were sending a team to the college. The letter objected to NCA's decision to send a team to Parsons, especially since he had not been consulted before the decision. In the letter he

stated, "The decision of the NCA board to send a review team to Parsons College this fall seems to me unfair to Parsons College. The report of the team that went to Parsons in December 1964 recommended a regular review visit "three or four years" from now, which would be not earlier than December 1967. And the Association (NCA) specified the employment of a consultant-me, as it happens-to work with Parsons during the period between visits. I have been to Parsons only twice. The Executive Committee had access only to the report on my first visit. If there are advantages to a college in working with a North Central consultant, Parsons can hardly have had the benefit of them-but now must prepare for and submit to a review visit on very short notice.

If the Board had asked my advice before taking action, I would certainly have advised against the action taken. Moreover I should have been asked.

If the North Central Association undertakes unscheduled review visits to every college subjected to unfavorable publicity, it will be a very busy asociation indeed. If it lets irresponsible journalist shape its policies or direct its relationship with its member institutions, it shares their irresponsibility. And if it ignores its consultants in dealing with its member colleges, it will soon run out of consultants" (Koener, 1970, p.208)

On April 1967, after the visiting committee had completed and submitted it's report, NCA revoked Parsons College accreditation, even after the visiting team had recommended "Continue accreditation with three provisions.." The committee's recommendation was reversed by the NCA Executive Board. Their recommendation, "Drop from membership in the NCA effective June 30, 1967." The vote was 6 to 1 (2 votes by telephone) in favor of the action. As if this wasn't unusual, the NCA issued a "public statement" of disaccreditation, a procedure it had not followed with any institution before, and made it public before it had notified Parsons College of the dissacreditation (Koener, 1970, p. 210). The reasons given for their decision was persistant failure on the part of the college to correct certain serious weaknesses in it's operation, and the Executive Board's lack of confidence in the administrative leadership of the college (Gibson, 1968, p. 588).

Roberts was convinced the NCA was more worried about him that about the "grave weaknesses" of the college, or perhaps thought of him as the gravest weakness and that a conspiracy to "get" him had taken place involving NCA, the Church and other groups and individuals (Koerner, 1970, p. 173). This seems to be supported by Collins in his article, which appeared in the January 1968 issue of The Journal of Higher Education , "notes on the Parsons Experience", where he states it later became apparent there were spectors behind the curtain-the NCA seems to have based its revocation on the report only as it related to promises or implied

promises of change made in 1965 when the college was taken off probabationary status given it after the 1963 visit. He goes on to say Roberts reneged on unofficial promises made to NCA in 1965 and this is the real reason that Parsons lost it's accreditation (Collins, 1968, p. 433).

An appeal was filed with NCA and a meeting was scheduled the third week of June. When the Parsons board of trustees appeared before the NCA Board they had decided that they would offer Roberts resignation in return for a reversal of the NCA decision. It failed and the revoking of accreditation was affirmed.

The final step, in what some call "the comedy of errors", was taking unsuccessful legal action to maintain NCA membership(Gibson, 1968, p. 589).

In view of the success of Parsons College, it should not be surprising that the Parsons Board of Trustees, faculty and over 5,000 students doubted that the NCA was justified in taking the action it did especially if the purpose, which it seems to be, was to rid the college of President Millard Roberts. Wouldn't a warning to the Parsons board of trustees, without public notice have accomplished the desired result and saved the college for the students. Could Parsons have fallen victim to the abiguity of higher education?

It would seem that in the end it was publicity that killed Parsons. In 1968, Robert Collins stated, "Within ten years every major college in the country will be using a variation of the parsons Plan."(Collins, 1968, p.430) It is now 1983, and all one has to do is look through the pages of The Chronical of Higher Education to see that his prediction has come true.

In 1955, Parsons was a college struggling for survival in an economy that was about to end the existance of the small private liberal arts college. State colleges were being selective and turning away thousands of students, taking only the best. Parsons gave the others a "second chance." Today many of the NCA attributed weaknesses of which Parsons was guilty have become the mainstay of higher education. Many colleges today are funded with federal funds to assist them in meeting the needs of the second chance student. It is hard to find a college that would turn down such funds.

As for faculty student ratio, most colleges today have ratios that are much higher than Parsons. Why has it suddenly become acceptable? Could it be that institutions today are financially where Parsons was twenty years ago, and that they to worship the almighty dollar?

The list could go on and on, but the answer would be the same. Nothing is easier than to make Parsons look bad by

comparing it to institutions, practices or standards that are not comparable. Perhaps final judgement about Parsons should be made keeping in mind that the very weaknesses of which Parsons was guilty, between 1955 and 1967, can be found in institutions in good standing, more institutions than Parsons critics would care to admit (Koerner, 1968, p. 214).

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